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EPILOGUE (Pentagon Papers)

On April 4, 1968, the Deputy Secretary of Defense [Paul Nitze]...established Southeast Asia Deployment Program #6. This program added 24,500 personnel to the approved Program #5, and placed a new ceiling of 549,500 on U.S. forces in South Vietnam. [This was the last troop add-on during the war]...

Late in the afternoon of April 3, 1968, the White House released the following statement by President Johnson:

"Today the Government of North Vietnam made a statement which included the following paragraph, and I quote:

'However, for its part, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam declares its readiness to appoint its representatives to contact the United States representative with a view to determining with the American side the unconditional cessation of the United States bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam so that talks may start.'

Last Sunday night [March 31, when Johnson announced a partial bombing halt, an invitation to the DRV to join talks, and his decision not to run for renomination as President] I expressed the position of the United States with respect to peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia as follows:

'Now, as in the past, the United States is ready to send its representatives to any forum, at any time, to discuss the means of bringing this war to an end.'

Accordingly, we will establish contact with the representatives of North Vietnam. Consultations with the Government of South Vietnam and our other allies are now taking place." (Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition, vol. IV, 602-03.)

The above passage is the beginning of the final, 3-page section of the Pentagon Papers, in its original form a 7000-page, 47-volume study of "U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam" beginning chronologically in 1945.

The study was formally open-ended in terms of content and time-period, and work on it, which started in mid-1967, continued into early 1969; but its authors and its supervisors decided to end it with Johnson's speech of March 31, 1968. The final three-page section beginning above is headed "Epilogue."

The reason for the decision to end the history at March 31, 1968 was clearly that those in charge of the study (Morton H. Halperin and Leslie Gelb, under Paul Warnke) shared the belief of virtually all Americans that a decisive turning-point toward ending American combat involvement in Vietnam had occurred on this date. The author of the Epilogue expresses this only slightly more cautiously when he goes on to say:

"The first step on what would undoubtedly be a long and tortuous road to peace apparently had been taken. In one dramatic action, President Johnson had for a time removed the issue of Vietnam from domestic political contention." (p. 603)

Confirming the latter observation, Richard N. Goodwin, a major speechwriter in turn for John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy, has recently written, "Johnson's withdrawal had virtually eliminated the war as an issue." (Remembering America, Boston, 1988, p. 528).

Goodwin is referring to the Democratic primary campaign between McCarthy, Kennedy, and Hubert Humphrey, but remarkably, the same remained essentially true even during the election campaign of that fall. Indeed, the war disappeared as a primary focus of political discussion and activity altogether, not only during the rest of 1968 but--with the exception of one month in the fall--through the first fifteen months of Nixon's new Administration. Intense public concern returned only with the invasion of Cambodia.

What follows is a partial, abbreviated recounting of my own experience of that curiously optimistic and acquiescent political mood in the 18-month period between early April 1968 (coinciding with the Princeton conference, subject of the previous "fragment") and the fall of 1969 (focus of the next fragment). It thus serves as a bridge between these two episodes, and an indication of some of my activities and experiences during that interval that will elsewhere be described in full.

What was remarkable about this prolonged period of public confidence that "peace was at hand" was that although some form of talks and eventually formal negotiations were proceeding throughout

the interval, so was the war, and at much the same scale of violence as before, especially in the air.

After March '68 US planes were no longer bombing above the 20th parallel in North Vietnam and after November they were not bombing North Vietnam at all. They simply shifted their targets to South Vietnam and Laos (and secretly, in early 1969, to Cambodia as well), while dropping a higher total tonnage than before.

In the last 10 months of 1968, the Johnson Administration dropped more bombs on Indochina than in the previous four years together (1.7 million tons, compared to 1.5 million tons since 1964). Nixon continued at the rate of about 1 million tons--half the total bomb tonnage of World War II--each year: for four years.

Although at various points in this particular period I was as (mistakenly) hopeful as anyone else about the prospects for a negotiated settlement, I seemed to be among a very small minority that kept the reality of continued large-scale war in mind: along with the possibility that the war might actually go on for a very long time. (It lasted seven more years after March 31, 1968).

From the time I returned from Vietnam in mid-1967, I was committed to the priorities of, first, avoiding new escalation, and second, finding a way out. I was anxious to share my perceptions and views with any political figure who wanted to hear them; and my reputation from Vietnam and the Pentagon was such that quite a few wanted to listen, in both parties.

Listening, in turn, to advisors or representatives of a field of Presidential candidates from Gavin, Romney and Rockefeller to Kennedy and Humphrey, I found that they seemed to share these priorities.

I would have liked to talk to representatives of all the potential candidates, but regrettably, I did not know anyone in line with Nixon. However, his purported "secret plan to end the war" sounded to most observers (wishfully, and mistakenly as it turned out) like some scheme for a disguised withdrawal. In fact, both Walter Lippmann and Joseph Kraft, as I recall--my hopes were influenced by them--guessed that a "new Nixon" was actually more likely to end the war expeditiously than was Humphrey, with his ties to the past.

In effect, the presumption was that Nixon's plan, if any, was compatible with what Henry Kissinger, who was working for Rockefeller until the convention, was now saying publicly and privately: that a new Administration, accepting the failure of previous aims and strategy, should settle for a negotiated solution that would provide no more than a "decent interval" before

Vietnamese Communist leadership inherited predominant political power in South Vietnam.

[Nixon seemed to confirm this assumption after winning the election, when he chose Kissinger as his Assistant for National Security. That impression was fatally misleading. The secret reality--scarcely recognized to this day--was that Richard Nixon did not regard such an outcome, ever, as at all acceptable, and that he did have a secret plan to avert it indefinitely.

Whether or not Kissinger was ever sincere in proposing that the U.S. limit its objectives to procuring a "decent interval" before a Communist flag flew over Saigon, he secretly jettisoned any such notion when he went to work for Nixon, to whom it was anathema. Without ever informing his liberal friends that he had shifted gears, Kissinger became the enthusiastic manager of Nixon's secret plan.]

Early in his campaign, Robert Kennedy had asked me to leave Rand and work for him full-time in charge of Vietnam issues, but I declined at that point. I wanted to stay free till the conventions so that I could continue to consult with the advisors to other candidates across the board on this one issue. But my hopes were with him, and I worked closely with his speechwriters, Adam Walinsky and Jeff Greenfield, on his Vietnam speeches, including the last public speech he gave.

Like a number of other people, I had come to feel more attached to Robert Kennedy than to any other person in public life I have ever met: starting with the fact that, since my return from Vietnam, no other American had so impressed me with the depth and urgency of his concern about the war.

(I should say that until the WRI conference in August 1969, I had actually met no one in the active antiwar movement, where this degree of concern and commitment was almost commonplace, in sad contrast to official circles and the Establishment.)

For this reason I had no conflict about turning down Hubert Humphrey when he, too, offered me a full-time job on his campaign. I knew he had been an early skeptic about our involvement, but it was hard to respect the degree to which he had knuckled under to Johnson's policy, and was still doing so.

Almost to the end of the campaign, Humphrey was unable to bring himself to buck Johnson by calling for an end to the bombing, which in turn kept me from paying any attention to the campaign: till the last week when the bombing of North Vietnam did stop. (From Robert Kennedy's death till this point, I had pretty much dropped out: from politics, from work, from Vietnam. Another story.)

Humphrey's offer came at the end of a luncheon at the Waldorf on the day he announced his candidacy in New York. A number of guests had been invited there to "advise" him, though really, it turned out, to be looked at as prospective staffers.

At the luncheon Humphrey made the disturbing remark at one point: "I'm really very worried about this simplistic slogan, 'No More Vietnams.'" [associated, of course, with both McCarthy and Kennedy supporters] That's very dangerous."

Sitting almost directly across from him, I felt some comment was called for. After a slight silence, with no one else volunteering, I said, "Well, it's better than a slogan, 'More Vietnams.'" Another short silence ensued.

As we were leaving, I pressed the point again (hoping to discourage him from staking out his "worry" on this point as a campaign position): "If 'No More Vietnams' means no more unilateral U.S. military interventions, that's really a pretty good policy." (My job offer, and later talks with Humphrey on Vietnam policy, came after and despite this exchange, whatever that indicates).

[In the twenty years since, it has become clear that "No More Vietnams" means very different things to different people. It still has a good ring to me, but it is undeniably ambiguous. A New York Times story of June 30, 1988, quotes President Reagan, on a campaign visit to Miami on behalf of Representative Connie Mack, as saying:

"Let me offer here a simple, straightforward message: No more Vietnams; no more Nicaraguas; no more Bay of Pigs. Never again."

The quotation continues, I am sorry to say:

"Connie Mack and I stand with the Nicaraguan resistance. We will not rest until we have won for them the full support they need--and until they have won for themselves the genuine democracy and freedom for which they have so bravely struggled."

Another problem with the proposition "No More Vietnams" as a focus of political discussion in the period when it arose, twenty years ago, was that it suggested that the Vietnam War itself was over, or on the way to ending, with no further need for attention or pressure from the electorate to end it.

Each of these suppositions should have been seen as problematic, at least. Not one of them was true in 1968 or '69, or for nearly six years longer. Yet one or all of these beliefs, especially the last, was held by a large fraction of the

electorate--the media and Establishment in particular--for most of the whole seven-year period in question.

One of the earliest demonstrations of this came in a symposium at the University of Chicago, involving an unusual and impressive range of scholars and former officials, addressed to the questions: "What are the lessons of Vietnam? How should these lessons shape our foreign policy?"

Of course, one was entitled to draw lessons from Vietnam in any year of that conflict, or after it, but the search for "the" lessons clearly suggested that the war was thought to be completed, the case was closed, and it was appropriate to balance the books. That was indeed the premise of most of the participants, as I remember. They were meeting during the first week in June, 1968.

The war had quite a few lessons left to impart. For example, that an Administration's willingness to "talk" and even "negotiate" with an adversary could be very different from a willingness to compromise in order to arrive at a negotiated deal. (That lesson could have been very helpful to the public and Congress in interpreting arms control "negotiations" as well.)

Or another: that an administration that destroys itself by lying about its aims and strategy may be replaced by another that lies about such matters just as much; and even proceeds to follow much the same failed strategy, covertly, in the belief that it will be more successful because it is meaner and cleverer.

Early lessons might well have been aimed at shortening this very conflict, rather than saved for elsewhere. As it was, the edited transcript of the Chicago symposium was planned for release under the name, No More Vietnams. But the sharp controversies among the participants about the nature of the lessons extended to the title.

The major disagreement here was not over whether the classic, traditional, original Vietnam War was finished yet or not, but whether or not one wanted more "Vietnams," i.e. other ones: however one took the meaning of that. So the final, compromise title was No More Vietnams?

The subsequent election campaign took place amid the general belief that either candidate would proceed to negotiate a withdrawal of American troops and an end to American involvement in Vietnam, so the war was not a major issue.

In the few days remaining after the bombing of North Vietnam was halted I took an interest in the candidates, and ended up voting for Humphrey--on grounds of personality and domestic politics--despite my suspicion that he might well take longer to trim US aims and get out of Vietnam than the new Nixon would.

(I was wrong. Among other things, as I suppose I should have known, there was no new Nixon. Just this month, in a December 12 column in the New York Times, his "volunteer flack" William Safire explains how he got Nixon to go along with that hoax, even though the notion that there was a deficient "old Nixon" irritated him, by pointing out to him, in effect, that it was a clever lie that would be readily believed and would prove useful.)

Shortly after the election, as the incoming Assistant for National Security Affairs, Kissinger passed a request to the Rand Corporation through his friend (and mine, then) Fred Ikle, head of the Social Sciences Division, to prepare a study of Alternative Options for Vietnam that he could present to the NSC in the new Administration. Rand President Harry Rowen named me in charge of the study and Kissinger approved this.

On Christmas Day, 1968, I flew to New York to present Kissinger with the completed drafts of several studies, the result of several weeks of intensive work in Washington and Santa Monica, on which a number of teams of analysts had collaborated under my supervision. Harry Rowen and Fred Ikle accompanied me for discussions with Kissinger at the Hotel Pierre, which was the transition location for the incoming White House staff.

After going over the seven alternative options that I had defined--each analyzed and roughly costed in the study--with Kissinger and his consultant Thomas C. Schelling, I wrote a revised draft of the study on December 27 at the Pierre.

Next Kissinger asked me to expand another paper I had drafted, a set of questions on controversial aspects of the war. At my suggestion, he subsequently sent these out to be answered in parallel by each of the national security agencies. This latter study, known as National Security Study Memorandum No. 1 (NSSM-1) led to 500 pages of replies from the various agencies. At Kissinger's request, I spent the month of February in the NSC offices helping to summarize these for the President.

While I worked on NSSM-1, Fred Ikle edited the Options Paper stylistically. The study was then circulated to the members of the National Security Council and briefed to the President and the NSC at the first NSC meeting of the Nixon Administration in January, 1969.

This third draft was identical to mine in content with one exception that looms as very significant in retrospect: the omission, at Kissinger's request, of my Option VII, Unilateral US Withdrawal. That was the single option of the seven alternatives that guaranteed US extrication from the war by American decision, subject to no practical Vietnamese "veto."

(No President ever did accept this course, but Congress did, in the form of the McGovern-Hatfield Bill, which eventually cut off funding for US operations in Vietnam. In other words, it was via this "option," unprecedentedly imposed by Congress using its Constitutional power over the budget, that the US war was finally ended.)

In contrast to the omitted Option VII, all of the other options--all six of those that the NSC actually considered formally--had the potential of keeping the US involved militarily in Vietnam indefinitely, unless either the Saigon regime and armed forces improved radically to the point of being self-sufficient, or the Hanoi government offered compromises acceptable to the Administration or refrained from launching offensives.

At first glance, that potential for endlessly continued war might have seemed, to an experienced observer, certain to be fulfilled. Past history gave little grounds for hope that either of the above conditions would be met, permitting the US to leave, as Nixon demanded, "with honour."

But there remained, in the spring of 1969, two seemingly reasonable grounds for hope that the US would nevertheless manage to end its involvement. One was that Nixon, at the first NSC meeting, defined the mutual withdrawal of US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam as an acceptable compromise, and decided to offer this in the Paris negotiations just beginning.

Morton Halperin--who had become one of Kissinger's deputies--and I regarded this as a very hopeful beginning, indeed, our own preferred first move. It seemed really possible that the Hanoi regime would accept, as their only way to get the fast and total withdrawal of US forces, with their accompanying close air support and artillery. At any rate, they had never been tested on this approach, and nothing could be lost in proposing it.

But what if Hanoi rejected this? (As they proceeded to do. In retrospect, the National Liberation Front or "VC" guerrilla forces in the South had been so depleted in the Tet Offensive of 1968 that the DRV no longer felt it could withdraw the Northern troops without unacceptable risk to their cause).

Then one could still reasonably hope that Nixon and Kissinger, despite having omitted to present the Extrication or Unilateral Withdrawal course to the NSC for formal consideration, would tacitly adopt this course.

(The notion that--as a third way out--Congress could or might force this course on a reluctant Executive had not yet been born in anyone's imagination. It was invented in September of 1969 by Senator Charles Goodell: who could not get a single co-sponsor for the idea that fall. Indeed, Goodell was virtually expelled from

the Republican Party for this transgression and he lost his seat in a three-way race in which most Republican funding went to his rival James Buckley running on the Conservative ticket.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier this was the approach that eventually prevailed by mid-1973 under the sponsorship of McGovern and Hatfield.)

Just as it seems reasonable to have hoped that Hanoi authorities might opt for Mutual Withdrawal--until they proved adamant--so it seems reasonable, for at least a while in 1969, even for an insider to have hoped that Nixon would espouse Unilateral Withdrawal, in some guise, if Mutual Withdrawal was unattainable through negotiations. Reasonable, in the sense that it seemed clear to some relatively experienced and well-informed analysts--me, for one--that that was what the President ought to do.

That hope, at any rate, was the basis of Morton Halperin's unwontedly cheerful state of mind in April and May of 1969. Having been known to me as a consistent skeptic and pessimist about US prospects and strategy at every stage of our involvement--i.e., having always been right so far--he had to be taken seriously by me now that he was saying in early May: "For the first time ever, I'm in accord with the direction of U.S. policy in Vietnam."

That pronouncement was based on his approval of the US negotiating proposal for Mutual Withdrawal, which had not yet been definitively rejected by Hanoi, and his belief, partly based on confidence in his own influence, that if Mutual Withdrawal were ruled out, the Administration would adopt some form of Unilateral Withdrawal that would result in effective disengagement.

Without having the basis of Halperin's position or inside information--or my access, say, to Halperin and others similarly placed--roughly this same expectation ruled the minds of most commentators, Congress and the public. It was the general supposition that this was the nature of Nixon's "secret plan," whether or not that existed in explicit detail. Most of them had taken it for granted ever since March 31, 1968, that this was the only reasonable course any President could adopt.

About that they were not wrong, in retrospect. But Presidents do not always choose reasonable courses. Unwary of this possibility, despite the recent example of Johnson--or perhaps because of the recent fate of Johnson's policy, deceit, and Administration, which most people regarded sufficiently exemplary warning to his successor--no part of the electorate brought pressure to bear on the Administration to shape its Vietnam policy in the first half of 1969.

The antiwar movement was quiescent. Despite the heavy bombing described earlier, draft calls and ground actions involving

significant casualties, no one was on the streets that spring protesting the war. There was an occupation of campus buildings that spring at Cornell--reminiscent of actions around the world the previous year--but it had to do with racial relations on the campus, not the war.

The student at Berkeley, James Rector, who was killed by police gunfire at the end of the spring term was not demonstrating against the war. In fact, he had not been demonstrating at all, he was watching events from a rooftop. He was a spectator-victim of efforts by the University of California and Berkeley police to close down a "People's Park" so the University could go ahead with its plans to make it a parking lot.